



St James's  
Church  
Piccadilly

**Sunday 26<sup>th</sup> June 202**  
**The Revd Lucy Winkett**

SERMON

How do you decide what are your priorities in life? Sometimes these choices are made for us by necessity, limited by money, time, energy, or the fact that we are subject to the authority of others.

Sometimes you might feel you have more power to set your priorities than at other times; sometimes a priority in earlier life doesn't seem so important later on. Global events such as the pandemic challenge the way we set our priorities. In this context, every day is full of small – sometimes larger – choices about priorities. Our priorities often reveal what is at stake for us.

And the two Bible readings today are shot through with the energy of this kind of decision making: what to do and when or how to do it.

The collection of sayings that we heard in the gospel reading from Luke are just full of energy. No wonder, because Jesus, the itinerant preacher and healer is on the road. He's travelling – he has set his face towards Jerusalem. All that happens to him happens along the way: his direction is set. And in the first reading which is Paul's letter to the Galatians – by the way the oldest document in the New Testament – written out before any of the gospels – so the closest to the time of Jesus – Paul has a great sense of urgency. He goes straight to the basics: Love your neighbour as yourself. That's it.

There are a hundred sermons in these two pieces of Scripture, which as most Scripture does, raise profound questions: the relationship between spiritual life and our bodily life, community living, Jesus's sharp rebukes like 'let the dead bury their own dead' – issued in the service of urging people to get their priorities straight, further rebuking saying that once set on the path, it's important not to look back – indeed if you do, you're not fit for the kingdom of God.

Because of the sense of urgency in both these readings – the sense of 'now' importance, it can feel as if everything is urgent, everything is vital, especially in the turbulent times that we are living in.

In the last week, this church has heard the fury and fear of members of Lithuanian, Latvian and Estonian communities in the UK, who, while singing the National Anthem of Ukraine, also urgently asked for support against Russian aggression. In Refugee Week, our good friend the Syrian artist Issam Kourbaj, is sharing his film 'Imploded, burned, turned to ash' in an urgent call to solidarity with the people of Syria. 15 March 2021 – the tenth anniversary of the first day of unrest – the performance recalls the role played by young people who used graffiti to spread a message of protest. In March 2021, Kourbaj said: "To mark the tenth anniversary of the Syrian uprising, which was sparked by teenage graffiti in March 2011, this drawing performance will pay homage to those young people who dared to speak their mind, the masses who protested publicly, as well as the many Syrian eyes that were, in the last ten years, burnt and brutally closed forever."

This afternoon at 3pm, we will, in partnership with the legal charity Redress mark today – the International Day in Support of Victims of Torture – and will hear directly from survivors, and also from Richard Ratcliffe who's wife Nazanin Zaghari Ratcliffe was held in Iran for 6 years.

These are just some of the stories being told in this church just this week – to add to the story of every person here who has a story about how you're doing – what's on your mind and heart, how you're dealing with the life challenges you are facing at the moment.

And our response as Christians is to act, not in haste or in fear, but to take action together, rooted in the practice of silence, contemplation, prayer and sacrament this morning. This is our priority: to put ourselves into the way of God's grace: as outlined by Paul – the fruit of the Spirit manifest in the world; love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

You'll see up today the boards that were here for yesterday's public consultation for the plans developed over years for the rejuvenation of this place: the building, garden, courtyard and buildings.

All the planning, consulting, fund raising, thinking - all of it - is for one priority: to point beyond it and beyond us – to reveal the glory of the presence of God in the world at the heart of all creation, and by doing that, reveal to every person who encounters this place virtually or physically that you deserve the

dignity and beauty of that God-given creativity. Manifest in the natural world and in human creativity within that.

This is in some ways very simple. Although this is a significant project, it's not a 'world-beating' or 'grandiose' thing at all: it's responding to the fact that there are so many people in society who simply do not believe that God's house - a place like this could be for them.

Any who pray regularly as part of church or who are part of church communities or structures consistently and persistently underestimate the barriers that exist between church communities and the rest of society. The physical barriers are just one manifestation of the spiritual, emotional, financial, cultural barriers in 2022: as the novelist Iris Murdoch said way back in 1970 but still true today: *Christianity is not so much abandoned as unknown.*

In a city where loneliness is an epidemic, and where polarised views dominate our conversations, it would be more than negligence, it would be criminal if we who are Christian don't communicate well, and powerfully, about the open hearted, creative way of life rooted in love of God and our neighbour that Christianity can be.

This whole project – the Wren Project - is about lowering those barriers and thresholds. How?

Of course by restoring the building, making the whole site accessible to everyone. Opening up new public entrances to the south and the east. Making the main entrance to the church and everywhere in the garden and courtyard step free.

But these physical transformations are only there for the sake of the people. Our restored courtyard and accessible garden will be much more able to hold great festivals, art and science conversations, new ways of gathering, in a green, urban, bio diverse environment with an air source heat pump generating energy for the whole site - in the tower.

It's not just what the buildings look like that's the vision: the buildings are simply containers for creative space they hold. And this project insists that the church is public sacred space, calling all of us beyond ourselves, declaring that human beings are, in the words of St Paul – free. Loved, and free.

At St James's, we are not naïve – the reality is that most people live their lives without reference to organised religion. And many are suspicious of the

church with good reason. Perhaps some of you are – and that's fine. It's up to us to show you that we have a vision for open, public sacred space. For people to engage differently with their own stories, with their neighbours, with our different histories, with social and environmental impact at its heart.

We are taking this on because we believe that open, public beautiful and historic spaces are important in modern society. There for people of all faiths and no faith: for everyone.

And for decades, the impact of this place has not just been religious; it's about building a vision for living together well in a city. About building a fairer, more just and diverse society, without being afraid of the deepest possible questions of human living.

That includes consideration of human identities – the intersections between gender, ethnicity, sexuality, which we will be addressing by flying the Pride flags next weekend, taking part in the march and holding prayers and celebrations listening to stories reflecting on all these topics next Sunday.

That includes the forced migration of people and notions of home: please see the absolutely beautiful film on the home page of our website made by our International Community Group reflecting on the journey through the asylum system and fleeing persecution.

That includes our fragile planet home and considering not our 'overlordship' but our interdependence within it, remembering as we restore this church building that there are fossils within it that link us back to the last Ice Age.

All of this is rooted in Christian spiritual practice of contemplation, prayer, sacrament. And gives us a way to approach the world, and our human living within it with compassion, gentleness, fierce justice and joy.

This kind of place- public sacred space - is exactly the kind of place to ponder these things, and never has it been more needed in time of pandemic, war, and the greatest pressure on living standards since records began.

I also want to say unashamedly that I think histories told well are important not least because a society that doesn't know its various histories is doomed to repeat the injustices of the past.

William Blake, the colossal and prophetic figure of 18th century poetry in London, baptised here in 1757, the Ghanaian abolitionist and freed slave

Ottobah Cugoano was baptised here too, whose book calling for the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade is still in print almost 250 years later. He worked closely with British MP William Wilberforce and Nigerian abolitionist Olaudah Equiano. The pioneering women artists Mary Beale and Mary Delany and the fiercely critical political cartoonist James Gillray.

All people who imagined the world to be different and worked to make it so. That's who we want to be today.

Please help us transform the large building on Piccadilly to run a café employing people directly out of prison. A person leaving prison with no training or employment is 50% more likely to reoffend. This café partnership addresses this head on, and starts later this year, in advance of the project.

We want to transform the courtyard and church space to enable a new programme of creative events, art, music, releasing the pews from their fixed position to create a more flexible and accessible space for art, music, debate and sanctuary. And put back the door that Christopher Wren built – so that the church opens up to the south.

As you will have arrived, you'll have seen the church spire, visible all around this area. What you may not know is that it is made not of lead as it appears, but of fibre glass: a mid 20th century solution to a wartime problem. You can help build a new spire for the top of the church tower, visible all around this area. It leaks badly, and we must replace it. And we're exploring replacing it with an equally light 21st century boat building material as part of the story of this place.

And music: this 17th century original organ case has no working organ pipes in it. This has for 3 centuries been a place where people have come to be soothed and inspired by great music: we want to put an organ back in the case and endow a 10 year scholarship to enable young musicians to learn their craft.

Along with William Blake, William Pitt, Ottobah Cugoano, and so many others in the history of this place such as the anti apartheid campaigner Trevor Huddleston, anti nuclear campaigner, Bruce Kent, the Vietnamese teacher Thich Nhat Hanh: people who have come to pray in this place such as Mother Theresa, pioneers for the rights of LGBTQ+ people we are champions for this vision: to transform this slice of central London and make it both beautiful and

just - with a strong vision of social and environmental transformation at its heart.

A former rector of St James's Church was William Temple who was rector here during the WW1. Hugely influential with Clement Atlee in setting up the NHS after the Second World War, he was famous for saying that the church is the only institution in society that exists for the benefit of the people who do not belong to it.

That is the vision that has driven this project; this is not a religious museum or even a place just for people who believe. This is public sacred space, rooted in the prayers of centuries, being restored and rejuvenated, with transformative social and environmental impact at its heart.

Please be part of this endeavour: because in a polarised society, where the practise of religion is sometimes more divisive than unifying, we are passionate about this transformation, open to people of all faiths and none.

And for us as a congregation, it's very important that we continually interrogate our plans and actions: In whose service do we spend our energies, hopes dreams and plans; at whose feet do we place our precious hopes for a better, fairer more just world – what Jesus called the kingdom of God? Above the door of the Rectory in the courtyard you'll see an inscription in Latin, which says that from the fires of war, rose this temple again. And a quote from psalm 127 that unless God builds the house, the labourers work in vain.

This building is not ultimate but penultimate; it is not what we are for but it points to the one to whom we all belong.

I suggest to us today that there is no greater priority than becoming ever more closely signs of God's love and presence in the world: and that's why we are not going to do nothing – but attempt to do something in transforming this place.

Everyone online and in the building today is part of this community: every single one, whether you've been coming here for years or are here for the first time.

Yesterday St James's publicised a saying from one of the mystics as part of our Holding the Silence programmes.

*Wisdom – ie holiness – consists in doing the next thing you have to do, doing it with your whole heart and finding delight in doing it* Meister Eckhart (Saturday Holding the Silence)

In such troubled and polarised times, let us together do the next thing we have to do, do it with our whole heart and find delight in doing it. Amen.